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The

HENRY WHITFIELD HOUSE



GUILFORD, CONNECTICUT

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SECOND EDITION

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NOTE

The first issue of the following sketch, (prepared in 1902) being exhausted, a second edition, with some necessary changes, has been authorized by the Trustees.

W. G. Andrews

November, 1908



P. S. Hon. S. H. Chittenden died at Washington, D. C., February 14, 1909. Ex-Governor R. S. Woodruff, a former trustee, has been appointed trustee in his place.



Henry Whitfield House.



THIS house, known in Guilford as "The Old Stone House," was built by Henry Whitfield, the first minister of the town, in 1639 or 1640. Permanent buildings cannot have been commenced, as a rule, before the middle of October, 1639, and therefore were not commenced, probably, until the following spring. But as the Stone House was to serve as a fort it is possible that the foundations were laid before the beginning of September, and the traditional date of erection, 1639, may be correct at least as respects the north end.

It was somewhat smaller than at present, but no doubt had three projecting chimneys. According to tradition the front part consisted of one room, of the full height of the house. Here worship was conducted until a meeting-house could be built, while folding partitions, like venetian blinds, divided the apartment when it was not needed for public uses. This would have left but three rooms for Mr. Whitfield's family, which apparently included nine children, besides the servants. But not long before this period the older daughters even of country squires in England slept in the same room with the maids, and the older sons in the common "hall" with the serving men. By the help of the movable partitions the household could have been disposed of at night, even if there were not, as seems on the whole most probable, a garret over the great front room. The history of the house, for two hundred years, is not very well known. We have the views of an expert in "Early Connecticut Houses," by Messrs. Isham and Brown, architects, (1900). It is there suggested that about the beginning of the 18th century the front part was divided by floors and partitions; that later in the century the south chimney was taken down to make room for windows; and that not far from the close of the colonial period the house, which had been neglected, was "handsomely repaired." But after a while it began to be suspected that the south wall had been weakened by the removal of the chimney, while leakage from the roof, which by this time was certainly in a bad way, may easily have injured the other walls. But perhaps

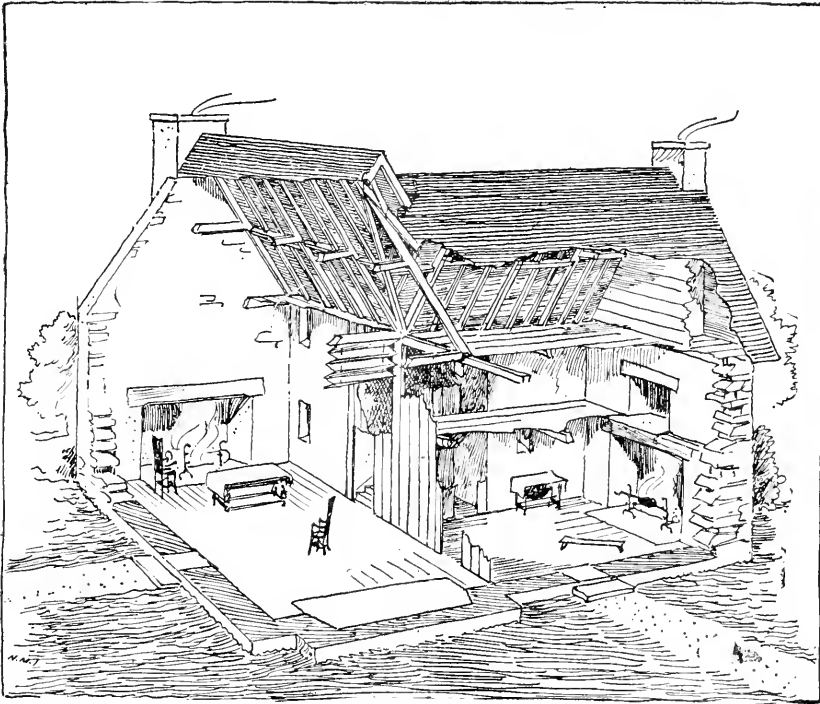
the most serious evil was the dampness due to the absence of space for air between the walls and wainscot. At length a wooden building was drawn to the premises for a dwelling house and the old home of the Whitfields became practically a barn. If it were to be lived in important changes were indispensable, and these were undertaken in 1868, but with the purpose of preserving as much as possible of the original building. In the interior the constructions of Whitfield's day, (except the curious timber-work of the roof, now necessarily removed) had



[Supposed appearance of exterior in 1640; approximate.]

almost disappeared already. As to the exterior it is probable that most of the south wall was taken down and certain that a new south chimney was build, while the north wall, with its huge old chimney, was left to a large extent untouched. It was long generally agreed that part, (the most precise testimony was to the effect that at least half) of the west wall remains, or most of the northern portion, although the whole structure was raised about two feet and a half. It was hoped

that this point and others would be settled when the inner plastering was removed for changes since made, because the difference between the modern mortar and the clay and shell-lime of the ancient builders would then be apparent. But when these changes were made in 1903-4, the object sought, that of providing a convenient room for the collections, called for little disturbance of the plastering. Consequently



[Traditional appearance of interior in 1640; a front garret probable]

there were few discoveries, though it became somewhat probable that less of the original west wall remained than had been supposed. But the little that was uncovered of the short east wall seemed old and though most of the ell must have been rebuilt in 1868, (when it was also lengthened), work comparatively old was found in it near the

angle which it makes with the front part of the house. Moreover, in the reconstructed walls much old material may have been used, though we do not know how much. The original foundations of at least the main building, though made thicker by a sort of a lining, apparently remain. In the house as it stands there is certainly a good deal of old work and probably still more old material. But on various interesting points, such as the form of the original living room, we must simply accept the testimony of the architect, Mr. Norman M. Isham of Providence, that "as regards the great questions of the house the alterations have no real evidence to offer."



The history of the owners belongs to that of the house. The first, Henry Whitfield, (or Whitfeild, as he wrote it,) was a good example of the class of gentlemen and scholars which furnished the emigrant Puritans with many of their leaders. He came of an old land-owning family, and was possibly a collateral descendant of Chaucer. He was a graduate of Oxford, and had been for about twenty years rector of Ockley in Surrey. A book of his, "Some Helpes to Stirre up to Christian Duties," had reached a second edition before he came to New England. After his return he wrote, or compiled, accounts of Indian missions, a subject in which religious Englishmen of all parties were interested. A "Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England" had lately been incorporated (1649) and for many years supported John Eliot's work. This society undoubtedly owed something to Whitfield's efforts, and it has, as we shall see, other associations with the Whitfield House. He married Dorothy Sheaffe of Cranbrook in Kent, the daughter of a clergyman, and descended collaterally from Archbishop Grindal and first cousin of the poets Giles and Phineas Fletcher. The Sheaffes had been successful clothiers, and manufacturers of cloth had long before become founders of great families in Kent. Even then an industrial as well as a military career might be the path to high social position in England, and such a stock was well suited for transplantation to industrial Connecticut. Dorothy, eldest daughter of these parents, married Samuel Desborough, the first magistrate of Guilford, whom Cromwell afterward made Keeper of the Great Seal of Scotland. Sarah married John Higginson, and Abigail, James Fitch, two New England ministers, and through them many Americans are descendants of the first pastor of Guilford.



Mr. Whitfield suffered both in health and fortune by his emigration. He went home in 1650 and offered his house and lands to the town at a low price. The town was too poor to buy them and Mrs. Whitfield and

her son, Nathaniel, remained here to look after the property. In 1654 there was some talk of a purchaser, conspicuous among leaders as gently born, as rich, and, what was better, as manly as himself, for the fine courtesy then acquired chiefly at courts, which has since become the distinctive mark of a gentleman, and to which democracy is in some respects more favorable than monarchy—the younger John Winthrop. In 1657 Whitfield died, leaving his whole estate to his wife, the first of several female owners. In May, 1659, the town seems to have felt itself rich enough to buy the house, though probably not the land, for the house was then offered to the New Haven Jurisdiction for a grammar school. The offer was made by the town's deputies, one of



[Appearance of exterior in 1902]

them being Mrs. Whitfield's kinsman by affinity, William Chittenden, and by the Deputy Governor of the colony, William Leete, also a Guilford man. The latter, afterwards Governor of New Haven, and later of Connecticut, when that had absorbed New Haven, likewise served as one of the Commissioners of the United Colonies of New England. In this capacity he took part in distributing the gifts of the missionary society mentioned above. His chair, of the ancient "wainscot" pattern, is one of the treasures of the Museum. The town's offer was not accepted, and in September, 1659, Nathaniel Whitfield, now in England, sold the whole property to Major Robert Thompson of London, merchant.

ROBERT THOMPSON, (styled also "armiger," that is, one entitled to a coat of arms,) was the youngest of five brothers, all of whom except himself had lived in Virginia, where there was a larger Puritan (not necessarily a nonconformist) element than is sometimes supposed. This family, one member of which was raised to the peerage, furnishes one of the countless examples of social eminence attained in England through trade. Near the close of his life Major Thompson succeeded the illustrious Robert Boyle as head of the missionary society, or "company," just spoken of for the second time. Though it had been established by Puritans it was an organ of English Christianity as a whole, and Boyle, an Episcopalian, had aided in saving it from ruin when the Puritans were driven from power. When he died (1691) the English Revolution had made it easy for nonconformists to take the principal oversight of what was in a manner their own institution, and Thompson's appointment as "governor" followed. The connection of the family with the society did not cease with him. His son-in-law, Sir William Ashurst, was the next governor and it would seem that one or more of his lineal descendants, like him owners of the Stone House, held high office in the organization during the 18th century. It still exists under the name of "The New England Company," being probably the oldest of Protestant missionary societies, and now seeks to promote Christianity among the Indians of British North America. It is apparently still administered in its old unsectarian spirit, though doing most of its work through ministers of the Church of England. Its early history supplies striking instance of religious sympathy in the midst of strong theological and ecclesiastical antipathies. Of this sympathy one may fairly regard the Whitfield House as a kind of monument. In the Museum is a volume of recently published letters from the archives of the New England Company, the gift of its governor.



Major Thompson died in 1694 and left the income of his Guilford property to his wife, Dame Frances, who became to that extent its second mistress. But as far as local records show the title remained with male descendants, Joseph, William and Robert, and the family held it for more than a century. It was part of entailed estate, and its American occupants were tenants of absentee landlords. And when it was alienated a fictitious lawsuit in New Haven was necessary to break the entail. All this gives a certain old world aspect to the story of the house in the colonial period. On the 21st of October, 1772, it was sold, with the land, by Robert Thompson "of Elsham in Lincolnshire in Great Britain, Esq'r." to Wyllys Eliot of Guilford.



The new owner was a great-grandson of the Apostle of the Indians,

and his grandfather, Joseph Eliot, the third pastor of Guilford, had in early life received payment for services as a teacher from the English Society so often mentioned. He was also a descendant of the colonial governors, Leete, Wyllys and Haynes, and, it is said, through the second wife of the last, Mabel Harlakenden, of various lines of kings. He probably valued more his descent from the yeoman's son, John Eliot. But, though retaining most of the land, he owned the house less than a fortnight. It was bought November 6, 1772, by Joseph Pynchon.



Mr. Pynchon, fourth son of "the Honorable Col. William Pynchon," was, after the Whitfields, the first and last owner who lived in the house, using it, we are told, as a summer residence, and probably maintaining in it the simple dignity of the early New England patri-cians. He was a loyalist and became a refugee, and it is with singular fitness that a dwelling built by an Englishman, and so long part of an English estate, is found at the very close of the colonial period the home of a man who would not renounce the King. He sold the house, in which the deed, now in the Museum, describes him as dwelling, June 27, 1776, just a week before the Declaration of Independence.



And with singular fitness, and as if to mark by the sharpest line the transition from the old order to the new, the first occupant under the sovereignty of the people was a patriot refugee from Long Island, Samuel Griffing, who came over in September and found shelter in the Stone House. He was, however, not its owner; it had been bought by his youngest brother, Jasper, whose descendants held it until 1900. Jasper Griffing was born on Long Island, at Southold, which has given several valuable families to Guilford. After an adventurous career elsewhere, he made his fortune in Guilford, became a very important member of this community and died at the close of the century, November 1, 1800.



The property now passed to Jasper Griffing's son, Nathaniel, whose portrait hangs on the walls of the Museum. He was a shipowner, a magistrate, and long the foremost man of the town. At his death, September 17, 1845, his son, Frederick Redfield Griffing, inherited the Stone House farm. He was a very active man of business, prominent in large enterprises carried on far beyond the limits of his native town. He has an honorable place among the "captains of industry" whom Connecticut furnished in such numbers to our vast industrial armies

during the nineteenth century. In the eighteenth century few such captains had been needed here, and her most eminent citizens served in the ranks. Mr. Griffing died prematurely, October 13, 1852, in New York, while on his way to the coal fields in Pennsylvania in the interest of a projected railroad.

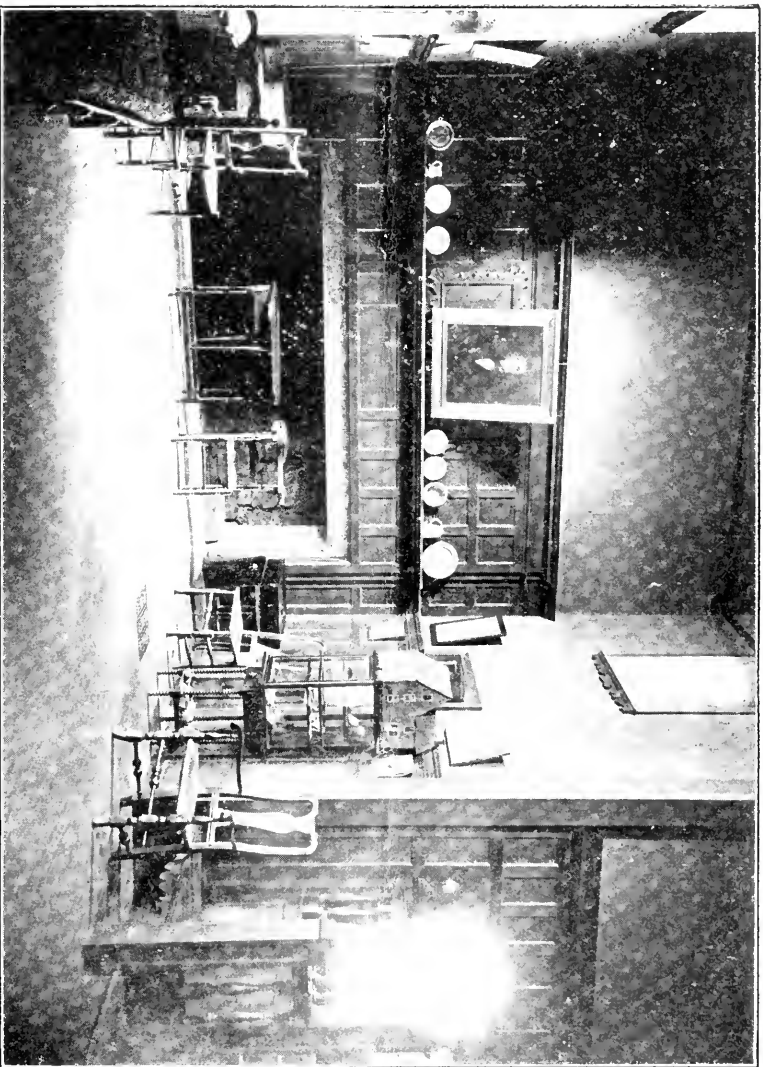


He was unmarried, and left most of his estate, including the Whitfield House, to his mother by will. Mrs. Sarah (Brown) Griffing, one of the wealthiest women in Connecticut, renewed the female ownership begun by Mistress Whitfield, partly resumed by Dame Frances Thompson, and henceforth continuous. She was the daughter of Samuel Brown, one of the "optimates" of Guilford at the Revolutionary period. Her gift to the town of the Guilford Institute (now combined with the town High School) in 1854, recalls the connection, whatever it was, of the first woman who owned the Stone House with the public-spirited offer of that for a grammar school nearly two hundred years before. Mrs. Griffing died June 1, 1865; two days later she would have completed her ninety-eighth year. She was succeeded by her only surviving child, Mary, the wife of Henry Ward Chittenden. He was descendant of the Guilford deputy who took part in communicating the offer just referred to, and bore a characteristic Guilford name with honor to his family and birthplace.



Mrs. Chittenden made a generous use of her large inheritance, giving freely to all good causes. The important repairs of 1868 were made after the house came into her possession, though made under the direction of her son-in-law, Mr. Henry D. Cone. She died March 21, 1878, leaving one child, Sarah Brown, the wife of Mr. Cone. Though Mrs. Cone had removed to Stockbridge in Massachusetts she took a deep interest in the Whitfield property, and it was her purpose, which circumstances put it out of her power to carry into effect, to give the house to the town of Guilford. She is in some degree a representative of the Whitfield family through her descent from the wife of William Chittenden, probably Mrs. Whitfield's cousin. And it is an interesting fact that among the eleven persons now entrusted in different capacities with the care of the house there are lineal descendants of its first owner and at least five of his associates, while a sixth has probably a collateral descendant among them.

On the 28 of September, 1900, the Whitfield House, with about eight acres of land, became the property of the State of Connecticut. The price paid (\$8,500) included \$3,500 from the State, \$3,000 from the town of Guilford, between \$500 and \$1,000 from residents of Guilford, and as



View of Great Fireplace at north end of Living Room.

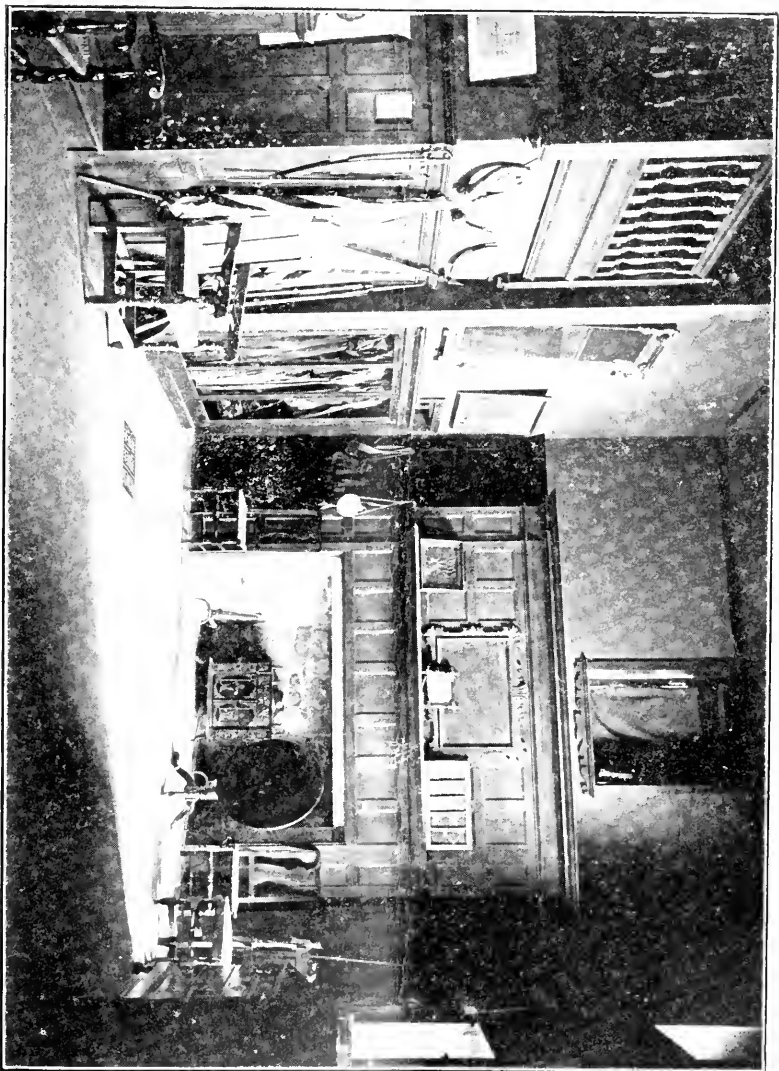
much from members of the Connecticut Society of the Colonial Dames of America. Individuals interested in various ways contributed the rest. The State has since generally appropriated \$2,000 biennially for "support and maintenance," and one or two hundred dollars has been obtained from gifts and sales. It will be observed that what has been accomplished would have been impossible without individual contributions and these must continue to be needed. The property is held by nine trustees, legally known as "The Trustees of the Henry Whitfield House." Their chief function is to establish and maintain in the building a State Historical Museum, and it is desired to make the institution embody in various forms the history of this commonwealth and the story of its people.



To fit the house for its new uses the long high room of Whitfield's time has been reproduced with something of the appearance which Whitfield could, had he wished, have given it. This involved the loss of nothing which remains of that period, in material or arrangement, and while providing a convenient place for the principal collections the apartment is itself an attractive and instructive part of the exhibition. More than two-thirds of the cost was met by the Colonial Dames. It having been found impossible to make the changes immediately the collections were virtually begun, after various unavoidable delays, June 7, 1902, though four articles had been deposited in May. On the sixth of October the whole number, comprising gifts and loans, was two hundred and forty-one. Now, (Nov. 9, 1908) 653 deposits have been entered and 640 are in the Museum. A number of loans have been withdrawn and two or three articles have disappeared.



On the first of November, 1908, 10,731 visitors' names had been registered, and many had failed to enter their names. The collection is considered a very interesting one already. The flax industry, for example, once pursued in all its stages on almost every farm, has a nearly complete illustration. And from the industries of Connecticut, which for generations more or less engaged its inhabitants, with rare exceptions, in manual labor, can be gathered illustrations of a large part of their exterior life. We are expressly told of Mr. Whitfield that he was never obliged to labor with his hands, but other emigrants of his class were, and their children commonly were. Such sources of large wealth as existed elsewhere were seldom accessible here and a wonderful equality of condition became a chief distinction of the commonwealth, while the blood of gentle and simple more and more frequently



View of East end of Living Room as it is at the present time.

flowed in the same veins. This by no means involved the disappearance of everything beautiful and stately, and it even fostered the growth of a very genuine and extremely valuable aristocracy. But plain, very seldom bad, manners and a graceful, even courtly, bearing, might both be seen among men and women closely akin. The Museum has to exhibit all aspects of these perhaps unique conditions, and there is ample material for doing it.



The official representatives of the State are entitled to help in promoting this end. The ways of helping them are obvious and numerous, and it is to be hoped that all will be employed. And it should not be forgotten that one way is to visit the Museum.



Trustees of Henry Whitfield House

Frederick Calvin Norton, Bristol.
President.

Hon. Samuel H. Chittenden, East River,
Secretary and Acting Treasurer.

Calvin M. Leete, Leete's Island, Guilford.
Ex-officio (First Selectman.)

Mrs. Godfrey Dunscombe, New Haven.
Mrs. Frank W. Cheney, South Manchester.

Rev. Frederick E. Snow, Guilford.

George Dudley Seymour, New Haven.
Edward C. Seward, Guilford and New York.
Rev. William G. Andrews, D. D., Guilford.

Curators:

Mr. and Mrs. Harry F. Griswold.

ADDENDA

On Page 11 beneath the illustration of the interior read “South”
for ‘East’ as printed in the descriptive line.

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